A Beautiful Mind and Joker

When it comes to interpretations of mental illness in cinema there are few films that compare to A Beautiful Mind (2001) and Joker (2019). Both of these movies are visually impressive masterworks which tell emotionally complex stories. Joker and A Beautiful Mind, in their own individual ways, are both films that tell complex stories of psychologically damaged men who battle with mental illnesses, though Arthur Fleck's and John Nash's stories go in very distinct directions, with dissimilar tones.

Joker is a dark, gritty and disturbing film directed by Todd Phillips. Loosely based on the DC character of the same name, Joker's narrative covers the downfall of Arthur Fleck, played by Joaquin Phoenix, transforming from a mentally unwell, failing comedian, who's not able to get the help he needs and instead, being pushed over the edge by his circumstances and his world into becoming both a violent criminal and a symbol for the failure of his society.

A Beautiful Mind is a grand and intelligent film directed by Ron Howard. The movie is loosely inspired by the life of the real mathematician John Nash. The narrative covers the life of a fictionalized John Nash, played by Russel Crowe, on his life journey through mathematics, romance, friendship, and schizophrenia. John's mental health struggles, particularly with paranoid schizophrenia, plague his life and create tension, though he is cared for by those around him and eventually learns to be at peace with his condition.

Both of the movies use various visual techniques in their own unique way in order to mirror the stories being told, and the realities of the minds of both men. Joker uses dark desaturated colours and lighting. As well as shadows over key scenes, particularly on Arthur. These choices greatly reflect the fractured world of the Jokers mind and how he is marginalised by his city and reality. The unsettling score by Hildur Guðnadóttir, paired with Joaquin Phoenix's haunting acting really helping to bring the film together and helps to create the uneasy dark feeling the movie wishes to instil in the viewer. In contrast, A Beautiful Mind's visuals are primarily realistic and clever. It shows the movie's world in the way John sees it, delusions and all, with no visual indicator that they exist only in his imagination. Russel Crowe portrays John Nash in a way, where even before it is revealed that he suffers from paranoid schizophrenia, the viewer can plainly see that he is very different, and a very interesting character. The orchestral sounds of James Horner's score only elevates the brilliance and the beauty of the film, tying it together well.

To conclude, A Beautiful Mind and Joker are each complex and impressive, both in writing and technique. The biggest difference between them is where both the characters end up in the end, one got the help he needed and found peace with his illness, the other couldn't, and spiralled into becoming a monster. Both Arthur and John, were shown to be mentally ill, psychologically damaged men, who experienced delusions and could be dangerous. The tones and stories might be drastically different, but they do share some key themes. In my opinion, Joker is wonderful, and A Beautiful Mind is near-perfect.